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## OBITUARY

### Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Hans J. Vermeer

Heidemarie Salevsky

Berlin

“cuncta fluunt, omnisque vagans formatur imago; ipsa quoque adsiduo labuntur tempora motu, non secus ac flumen; neque enim consistere flumen nec levis hora potest: sed ut unda inpellitur unda urgeturque prior veniente urgetque priorem, tempora sic fugiunt pariter pariterque sequuntur et nova sunt semper; nam quod fuit ante, relictum est, fitque, quod haut fuerat, momentaque cuncta novantur.”

(Ovid : *Metamorphoses*, Book XV: 177–185)

The community of translation scholars has lost one of its most distinguished members. On February 4, 2010, Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Hans Josef Vermeer died in Heidelberg, Germany. He would have turned eighty on September 24 of this year. His family placed the following words above the announcement of his death: “When an old man dies a library burns.” I would like to modify this statement somewhat: “When a scholar of Hans Vermeer’s calibre dies a library burns.”

Hans Vermeer was a very special kind of person. Right until the final weeks of his life he devoted his energies to his chosen field, Translation Studies. He did pioneering work in shedding light on translating and interpreting. The announcement of his death posted by his colleagues, friends and pupils (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, February 13, 2010) lists 41 names, including such well-known professors of our discipline as Rosemary Arrojo, Justa Holz-Mänttari, Mary Snell-Hornby, Klaus Kaindl, Gauti Kristmannson, Franz Pöchhacker, Erich Prunč, Katharina Reiß, Miriam Shlesinger, Gideon Toury and Lawrence Venuti to mention just a few.

Hans Vermeer was a translation scholar who had the ability to navigate the paradigm shifts in theory, to follow the numerous different threads in history and to demonstrate how these run in parallel, cross each other, gradually intertwine or interconnect. He was at ease in adjacent disciplines such as philosophy or rhetoric, and au fait with translators’ comments on their work in the past and present, as well as with developments in literary history and Bible translations. Hans Vermeer was equally at home with the absolutization of the idea in Plato, the unsuccessful *imitatio* concept of the Renaissance, the culturally sensitive approaches

of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher and the relapse into reductionism associated with the ostensibly rigorous scholarship of the 19th-century.

In his quest for the roots — always using the relevant languages — Hans Vermeer gained insights for the present era, identified fundamental positions as explanations and conditions for resulting attitudes in theory and practice, engaged in source criticism, pointed out explicit and implicit theoretical approaches and provided impressive illustrations of the links between “external” and “internal” translation history. Hans Vermeer embedded theoretical approaches in the course of translation history, unearthing examples to support the *skopos theory* which he established. Even so, he never failed to point out, to quote Hamlet’s words “there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so”, that no theory is unrelated to space, time and situation. This was very helpful, not least in the East-West debate after German reunification, when Hans Vermeer in 1992 accepted my invitation to a visiting professorship at the Department of Translation Studies of Humboldt University in Berlin (Institute of Slavonic Studies) which I directed at the time. Before that I had served as a visiting professor at the Ruprecht Karls University in Heidelberg in 1991. Hans Vermeer had attended my lectures in Heidelberg and I had attended his in Berlin, both periods being marked by intensive discussions, and not just about subject-specific matters. We had first met at an international meeting held in the GDR in September 1989, i.e. a few weeks before the fall of the Wall.

A prominent characteristic of Hans Vermeer was his openness, which always proved an asset during discussions at the Research Seminar on Translation Studies. When this discussion forum was established at Berlin’s Humboldt University in March 1989, it never occurred to me that the first event would be followed by another seventy six and that over the following twenty years Hans Vermeer would put on seven events either alone or together with others. I vividly remember the event in 1992 devoted to the translation of the Decalogue at the Theological Faculty of Humboldt University and also the interdisciplinary colloquium to mark the 225th anniversary of the birth of the German theologian, philosopher and philologist Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher in November 1993. Hans Vermeer also read a paper dealing with language and culture at the international conference held in 1995 to mark 100 years of training translators and interpreters for Russian at Berlin University (1894–1994).

After my place of work had changed to Magdeburg in 1996 we had very animated discussions there in 1998 about the need to change the curriculum. In 2004, at the seventieth event marking fifteen years of the Research Seminar, our discussions about his paper on the enhancement of translation and reflections on Jacques Derrida were just as animated. Small wonder, then, that the Research Seminar organized an honorary colloquium to mark Hans Vermeer’s seventy fifth birthday

in 2005. It was met with a lively response, attracting scholars from Austria, Brazil, Britain, Finland, Turkey, the United States and several German universities.

Hans Vermeer opened doors — between disciplines and between universities, for example at the conference on problems with translator and interpreter training curriculums in the former East and West Germany in November 1991, that is at a time when he held the chair of Translating and Interpreting Studies and Portuguese at the Ruprecht Karls University in Heidelberg.

Hans Vermeer always allowed us to share his scholarly curiosity and the pleasure he derived from research. His publications, his lectures in Berlin and the papers presented at the Research Seminar always took us on journeys of adventure across the centuries, sometimes involving excursions into intriguing and occasionally amusing thematic sideshows, and they were always manifestations of a brilliant mind of breathtaking erudition. They drew our attention to what might be and provided an opportunity to measure out the space that opened up and revealed a light that made something else visible, namely perspectives. The result was changes both in our discipline and in the way people felt and thought about its problems.

For all those who admired Hans Vermeer not “only” as a scholar, but also as a friend, it was a great joy to see that decades of work devoted to teaching and research ultimately earned him the highest accolade a scholar can hope to receive. On January 17, 2010 the University of Mainz/Germersheim conferred an honorary doctorate on Hans Vermeer. This was the first to be granted in Translation Studies at any German university.

At the University of Mainz in Germersheim Hans Vermeer was Professor of General and Applied Linguistics from 1971 to 1983 before he was offered the chair of Translation Studies with special reference to Portuguese at Heidelberg University in 1984, which he held until becoming an emeritus professor in 1992. After spells as a visiting professor at Leopold Franzens University in Innsbruck/Austria from 1999 to 2002, at Boğaziçi University (Bosphorus University) in Istanbul from 2002 to 2003 and finally at Okan University in Istanbul from 2004 till the winter semester of 2007/08, Hans Vermeer returned to the University of Heidelberg and to the University of Mainz in Germany to teach in the final years of his life.

The honorary doctorate was a well-deserved tribute to a scholar with over 300 publications to his credit in which he continually reappraised and questioned what he (and others) had said, displaying a stunning knowledge of literature.

Hans Vermeer’s first publication can be traced back to the year 1959 and concerned the Portuguese language. Contributions to German studies were made from 1960 onwards, and in 1963 he began to publish works dealing with linguistics and indology. This was also the period when he turned to translation studies and foreign language teaching for the first time.

His editing career began in 1986 with the periodical *TEXTconTEXT*. The series *translatorisches handeln* followed in 1989 and the series *TEXTconTEXT Wissenschaft* somewhat later.

There is no need to mention the standard works because they are well known. But who could have written the seven volumes on the history of translation and translation theory other than someone who was as familiar with Hebrew, Greek and Latin as with various Romance languages and English, someone who was both an Indologist and well versed in the historical development of the German language.

One of Hans Vermeer's books that left a particularly deep impression on me was *Skizzen zu einer Geschichte der Translation*. It always seemed to me that Hans Vermeer himself lived up to the quotation (after *Anguttara Nikaya* 3,66) which precedes the second part of the first volume of this work:

Geht nicht nach Hörensagen, Überlieferungen, Tagesmeinungen, Autorität heiliger Schriften, Vernunftsgründen, logischen Schlüssen, Theorien, Meinungen, persönlichen Vorlieben und Autorität! Wenn ihr selber erkennt, dass etwas un- gut, verwerflich und tadelnswert ist und zu Unheil führt, dann gebt es auf. Wenn ihr selber erkennt, dass etwas gut, untadelig und lobenswert ist und zu Segen und Heil führt, dann macht es euch zu eigen. (Nach dem *Anguttara Nikaya* 3,66)<sup>1</sup>

Vermeer's last article "Vom Altern der Texte" will be published posthumously in Berlin.

Heidemarie Salevsky

The Board of *Target* wants to join the many colleagues mentioned by Heidemarie Salevsky in their expression of respect for the memory of Professor Hans Vermeer. They consider his work as a truly monumental contribution to the development of Translation Studies during recent decades. Several of us particularly remember Professor Vermeer as a most inspiring CERA Chair Professor at K.U. Leuven in 1990.

### List of books on Translation Studies

- 1983 *Aufsätze zur Translationstheorie*; Heidelberg.
- 1984 (with Katharina Reiß) *Grundlegung einer allgemeinen Translationstheorie*; Tübingen (= Linguistische Arbeiten 147) — <sup>2</sup>1991. — Finnish translation by Pauli Roinila: *Mitä kääntäminen on. Teoriaa ja käytäntöä*; (Helsinki 1986). — Spanish translation by Sandra García Reina and Celia Martín de León with Heidrun Witte as consultant and coordinator: *Fundamentos para una teoría funcional de la traducción*; (Madrid 1996).
- 1986 *voraus-setzungen für eine translationstheorie — einige kapitel kultur- und sprachtheorie*. Heidelberg.

- 1992 *Skizzen zu einer Geschichte der Translation*, Bd. 1 und 2; (Frankfurt a. M.) (= thw 6.1f).
- 1996 *A skopos theory of translation (Some arguments for and against)*; Heidelberg (= TEXTconTEXT Wissenschaft 1)  
*Die Welt, in der wir übersetzen. Drei translatologische Überlegungen zu Realität, Vergleich und Prozeß*; Heidelberg (= TEXTconTEXT Wissenschaft 2).  
*Übersetzen als Utopie — Die Übersetzungstheorie des Walter Bendix Schoenflies Benjamin*; Heidelberg (= TEXTconTEXT Wissenschaft 4).  
*Das Übersetzen im Mittelalter (13. und 14. Jahrhundert)*, Bd. 1: *Das arabisch-lateinische Mittelalter* — Bd. 2: *Deutsch als Zielsprache* — Bd. 3: *Literaturverzeichnis und Register*; Heidelberg (= TEXTconTEXT 4.1–3).
- 2000 *Das Übersetzen in Renaissance und Humanismus (15. und 16. Jahrhundert) — Band 1: Westeuropa; Band 2: Der deutschsprachige Raum, Literatur und Indices*; Heidelberg: TEXTconTEXT (= TEXTconTEXT Wissenschaft 6f).
- 2006 *Luhmann's "Social Systems" Theory: Preliminary Fragments for a Theory of Translation*; Berlin: Frank & Timme.  
*Versuch einer Intertheorie der Translation*; Berlin: Frank & Timme.
- 2007 *Ausgewählte Vorträge zur Translation und anderen Themen — Selected Papers on Translation and other Subjects*; Berlin: Frank & Timme (= TransÜD 13).

## Note

1. The Standard English translation (from the Pali, by Ñanamoli Thera) of the fragment of the *Salha Sutta* on which Vermeer draws here reads as follows (see <http://www.what-buddha-taught.net/accesstoinight/html/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.066.than.html>):

... do not be satisfied with hearsay or with tradition or with legendary lore or with what has come down in scriptures or with conjecture or with logical inference or with weighing evidence or with a liking for a view after pondering it or with someone else's ability or with the thought 'The monk is our teacher.' When you know in yourself 'These things are unprofitable, liable to censure, condemned by the wise, being adopted and put into effect, they lead to harm and suffering,' then you should abandon them.

...

When you know in yourself: 'These things are profitable, blameless, commended by the wise, being adopted and put into effect they lead to welfare and happiness,' then you should practice them and abide in them...

## Author's address

Professor Dr. Heidemarie Salevsky  
 Fachbereich Kommunikation und Medien  
 Hochschule Magdeburg-Stendal (FH)  
 Breitscheidstr. 2, Haus 1, Raum 1.12  
 D-39114 MAGDEBURG  
 Germany

heidemarie.salevsky@hs-magdeburg.de

